

NOTES

IMPROVING ONTARIO'S CHILD CARE SYSTEM: JANET ECKER REPORT

Ted Glenn, Research Officer

INTRODUCTION

In the fall of 1995, Ontario's new Conservative government established a review of the provincial child care system under the direction of Janet Ecker, then Parliamentary Assistant to the Minister of Community and Social Services. The review process, and the recommendations it generated, were grounded in the following principles:

- that parents have the primary responsibility to care for their children and to make decisions regarding that care;
- that government policies should seek to support and encourage parents in that role; and
- that Ontario's child care system currently includes many different kinds of care, from family-based care or informal home care to regulated centre-based care, and that this diverse range of options is necessary if the system is to successfully meet the unique needs of families.

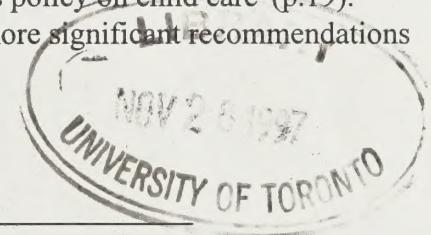
In September 1996, Ms. Ecker, recently promoted to Minister of Community and Social Services, released her final report, entitled *Improving Ontario's Child Care System*. This Note provides a brief summary of the Report. Interested readers should consult the document

itself for more details.¹ It is available in the Legislative Library.

THE ONTARIO CHILD CARE REVIEW

After being assigned the task of reviewing Ontario's child care system, Ms. Ecker established the Child Care Review Working Group. The Group was composed of nine child care professionals who represented private and non-profit operators, municipal and provincial governments, and academics. The Group conducted province-wide consultations with interested individuals and groups and visited more than 50 child care sites and programmes.

Improving Ontario's Child Care System begins by explaining how Ontario's child care system currently operates and then outlines the major problems which the Review Group found with the system. The remainder of the report outlines "a comprehensive series of proposed directions that are designed to generate informed commentary and assist the government in formulating its policy on child care" (p.19). Some of the more significant recommendations were:



¹ Janet Ecker, *Improving Ontario's Child Care System* (Toronto: Queen's Printer for Ontario, 1996).

- **Licensing:** Child care operators should be subject to frequent, unannounced inspections over a two-year period instead of the current annual inspections to qualify for licences. After their initial two-year qualification period, investigators should pay special attention to child care operators with inconsistent records of compliance.
- **Fee Subsidy Eligibility:** The Ministry should implement a simplified, streamlined income test to determine fee subsidy eligibility as a replacement for the "needs tests" currently administered by municipalities. This new test should be based upon a sliding scale using income, family size and allowable child care fees to ensure that those families with higher incomes contribute more than those with lower incomes.
- **Supervision Ratios:** The Ministry should increase the staff-to-child ratio for preschoolers (i.e., those aged 2-1/2 years to 3 years and 8 months) from the current 1 staff to 8 children in Ontario. In addition, regulated home care providers should be permitted to care for up to 7 school-aged children before and after school (the current limit is 5).
- **Wage Subsidies:** The Ministry should replace existing direct wage subsidies to child care workers with programme stabilization grants distributed equally to private and non-profit operators. Wage subsidies should be equal to the amount currently available to non-profit operators and should be implemented over a three-year transition period.

It should be noted that the Ministry of Community and Social Services can implement a number of these recommendations without the assistance of municipalities. Those reform proposals which encroach upon joint municipal-provincial jurisdiction (i.e., fee subsidy eligibility testing) will be developed in more

detail by David Crombie's "Who Does What" panel on municipal-provincial disentanglement.

PUBLIC RESPONSE

Media coverage² of the Ecker Report has focused on three issues:

- claims by the Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care (a provincial association of non-profit child care providers and advocates) that recommended changes to the existing wage subsidy system would cause the average child-care worker's salary to be cut by \$4,500;
- claims by the Association of Day Care Operators (a provincial association of private child care providers) that the wage subsidies would not be phased out immediately and would continue to discriminate against private operators; and
- claims by Metropolitan Toronto Councilor Olivia Chow that changes to the existing wage subsidy system would cause Metro to lose 23,000 child care spaces.

3 1761 115500100

² See, in general, Jack Lakey and Tanya Talaga, "Groups Split on Impact of Day-care Funding Cuts," *Toronto Star*, 7 September 1996, p. A4; Jane Gadd, "Ontario Day-care Report Gets Mixed Reviews," *Globe and Mail*, 7 September 1996, p. A3; Jeff Harder, "Pay Cuts for Workers 'Erroneous,'" *Toronto Sun*, 7 September 1996, p. 16.